

## Essays in Philosophy

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Volume 15

Issue 2 *Consciousness*

Article 8

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July 2014

# Review of "What Happened in and to Moral Philosophy in the Twentieth Century? Philosophical Essays in Honor of Alasdair MacIntyre"

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### Recommended Citation

Ross, Steven (2014) "Review of "What Happened in and to Moral Philosophy in the Twentieth Century? Philosophical Essays in Honor of Alasdair MacIntyre"," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 15: Iss. 2, Article 8. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1526-0569.1512>

Essays in Philosophy is a biannual journal published by Pacific University Library | ISSN 1526-0569 | <http://commons.pacificu.edu/eip/>

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## Review of "What Happened in and to Moral Philosophy in the Twentieth Century? Philosophical Essays in Honor of Alasdair MacIntyre"

### **Erratum**

07.29.2014 - Spelling of book subject's name corrected.

## **Book Review | *What Happened in and to Moral Philosophy in the Twentieth Century? Philosophical Essays in Honor of Alasdair MacIntyre***

**Steven Ross**

Published online: 18 July 2014

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***What Happened in and to Moral Philosophy in the Twentieth Century? Philosophical Essays in Honor of Alasdair MacIntyre*, edited by Fran O'Rourke. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013, 486 pp. &70.00 hardcover, ISBN 978-0-2680-3737-6**

“Essays in honor” is exactly right. The essays here vary enormously in all sorts of ways. Some trace out MacIntyre’s intellectual journey in great detail. Some are speculative essays on subjects not too far from MacIntyre’s heart, such as Marxism and the possibility of moral objectivity in twentieth century life. Some revisit arguments that MacIntyre himself made in the past, about say emotivism, and expand upon MacIntyre’s view. Some apply MacIntyre-like “narrative” critical analysis to other matters, like the persistence of beliefs about hard work paying off in contemporary America. But in no case do we see anything *critical*. We are very far from anthologies like *Words and Objections*, or *Reading Rawls*, where part of what the reader could hope for was new ways of thinking of the limits of a view, or the problems an adherent of this view would have to come to grips with. This sometimes reads like the record of a mid-century Communist Party congress, with fulsome congratulations from all sides for the breathtaking progress so far, and confident promises of still yet more to come. But still, it is a chance to revisit and think about a genuinely interesting argument. And if the many writers in this collection do not worry very much about the problems with MacIntyre’s view, this can be a spur for the reader to do so. That certainly was the case for me.

The collection begins with an essay by MacIntyre himself in which he traces out his philosophical story, how he came to be influenced by first this argument, then by that one,

and how he slowly came to see philosophy not only “historically,” (for this, broadly understood, is hardly unusual) but in a certain sort of crisis, a crisis tied to the background social dislocation philosophy unselfconsciously reflected, and so a crisis that philosophy itself necessarily could not see. It is a nice recapitulation—clear, short, unfussy—and recommended. There is a short section on the nature of contemporary journal-driven academic argument that is quite excellent, and I will consider it separately. First though, I will turn to the argument and take up what I think are the most serious gaps or presumptions in it. It is interesting that, after all these years, the argument, and the defense of it, has changed very little. As a result, serious criticisms, made more or less at the argument’s initial appearance, may pretty much be made again now too. Of course, this is often true, and especially so when the argument is plausibly thought of as one of great initial power. Quine did not change his view of his argument very much over the years either. But in MacIntyre’s case, the absence of very much alteration is interesting for a further reason, a reason that affects the other essays as well.

A deep part of MacIntyre’s position is his criticism of Kantianism and liberalism in so far as it is Kantian in orientation. When *After Virtue* was first published, in 1981, I think it is fair to say that very few of us had an accurate sense of how enduring Rawls’ argument was to prove to be. And this is because, very few of us had any sense of how good Rawls’ further elaborations of the argument were to be, and how much better the argument would become by the time of Rawls’ death in 2001. Fair enough. If MacIntyre’s assessment of Rawls in *After Virtue* was rather casual and inaccurate, almost pointless one might say, he was in plenty of good company then. Norman Daniels, R. M. Hare, Gerald Dworkin, and Joel Feinberg hardly got Rawls right in *Reading Rawls* either. But now, in 2014, there are certain characterizations of the Kantian argument that just will not do. And to fail to take up Rawls, or the liberal political argument, in terms that reflect its genuine power just renders the argument that fails in this way suspicious, probably irrelevant. If there is anything that links so many different essays, MacIntyre’s own and the many generated in honor of him, it is this. There is this relentless determination to leave Rawls and Kant out, to present Kantian themes as if they were Aristotle’s, and to characterize “political liberalism” in ways that call Nozick-like libertarianism to mind, but nothing else that I can think of. It is a remarkable, and truly weird, fact. Kant, one of the most central and complicated moral philosophers in history, and Rawls, offering one of the more powerful and subtle restatements of the Kantian project, are simply not present. Like discredited generals no longer to be found in a May Day parade photo, for me, the absent Kant, the absent Rawls, loomed very large in these so called historical essays.

## MacIntyre, restated

All right then, to MacIntyre's intellectual journey, and to the argument that came out of it. It is a striking fact that for MacIntyre, the persistence of disagreement, or the seeming "irresolvability" of certain disputes shows something *deep*, and something *interesting*. He comes to this point over and over again. He is first a Thomist. Then, exposed to the arguments of Ayer and Sartre, he sees a powerful challenge to the idea that a reason could be a "good" reason apart from the agent's decision. And furthermore, while he himself may well have reasons to prefer one position over another, he also realizes, to his growing consternation, that none of these reasons, or considerations can ever claim to be *decisive*.

It is on the Thomist view, a good reason for acting in this way rather than that that by so acting one will achieve some good or avoid some bad and whether that at which one aims is good or bad is a matter of fact, a matter of whether the object aimed at contributes to or is constitutive of some aspect of one's flourishing as a human being. For Ayer and Sartre by contrast there are acts of choice implicit or explicit that are prior to and determinative of one's judgments of good and evil. For Thomists acts of choice are themselves to be evaluated by logically prior judgments concerning the good to be achieved or the evil to be avoided by those acts. How, I asked, was I to decide between these rival claims?

It was not that I could not find a number of reasons for favoring something closer to a Thomist view than to Ayer's or Sartre's. But I was well aware that none of these reasons were conclusive, were such that they could not be rationally resisted. (19-20)

On we go. A bit of Marxism helps MacIntyre see that any particular bit of so called moral philosophy is but the public relations arm of some actual morality, and *this*, what we call "morality," is just an after the fact apologist, the justification story for whatever economic and social relations in fact obtain at the time. His growing exposure to social anthropology only serves to support "the truth of this thesis" (20). And now, we are almost ready to take up the central puzzle, understanding the philosophical arguments of the day.

I therefore asked: What is the distinctive morality of this social and economic order that I inhabit, and how does contemporary moral philosophy stand to that morality? And in pursuing an answer to this question, I was guided not only by Marx and Engels, but also by John Anderson, who had urged that, if we were to understand social institutions and relationships, we should ask not what function or purpose they serve but to what conflicts they give expression. This suggested that both the

morality and the moral philosophy of the present age are best understood as milieus of conflict, sites of disagreement. (21)

We have not yet taken up any content, not yet made any particular claims about any philosopher, and yet there is already so much to disagree with, so much to scratch one's head in puzzlement over. In the first place, just what does the persistence of disagreement really show? MacIntyre writes 1) as if this were an interesting, or distinctive, fact about moral philosophy, and 2) as if this were an interesting, or distinctive, fact about moral philosophy in the modern age. In fact, obviously, it is neither. Consider the disagreements we have in philosophy of mind over how best to characterize intentionality. Consider the disagreements we have in philosophy of language over the role external relations among objects in the world play in understanding meaning. Consider the disagreements we have in philosophy of science over the legitimacy of explanations that fail to reduce to physics. Heavy stuff. And it would be really, really *weird* to point to these disagreements, and to their persistence, as evidence of any sort of "crisis." Indeed, if anything, there is a case that can be made for precisely the opposite point of view. When we look back at the state of philosophy of mind say in the late 1950s, when a kind of neo Wittgensteinian or Rylean behaviorism held unchallenged sway, and disagreement was hard to find, this was simply because what made the subject *hard* was being suppressed, ignored, simply not taken up. The *absence* of disagreement was a symptom of the discipline in disorder, one might say. These subjects are hard, complex subjects, and our intuitions about them are, as a result of this fact, rightly diverse. "Disagreement" simply reflects *understanding*.

And turning to the distinctive world of moral philosophy, one has to be especially puzzled by this characterization. In the first place, there is nothing special about "our era" in this way; very far from it. It is hard to know where this willful reading of the history of philosophy can come from. Certainly not from any standard Introduction to Philosophy course, where we are dutifully treated to the contrast between, oh, say Plato and Aristotle, who, I think, with a little imagination, can be made to continue to "disagree." Consider Hume in this regard, too. *A Treatise of Human Nature* is but a superb, enduring disagreement with the doctrines of his day regarding how to understand reasons for action and the possibility of moral objectivity. If Hume had never existed, never written the *Treatise*, I suppose the Eighteenth Century would have been philosophically far more harmonious. But that would hardly have been philosophical progress!

And besides, this claim regarding the "persistence" of disagreement needs to be thought through a little more carefully. In many cases, disagreement "persists" because of the revision of certain theses in light of what *are* taken to be "decisive" criticisms. It is precisely because of what MacIntyre denies—decisive progress in purely philosophical argument—

that certain sorts of disagreements persist as well. This point is perhaps first easier to see in a non-moral philosophical context. Consider the (relatively) recent defense of the idea of consciousness as evading naturalistic description in Thomas Nagel's work. There are, as everyone can see, certain affinities between Nagel's claim and Descartes' view, of course. But Nagel does not see consciousness as wholly separate from the material world. *That* view is wholly discredited, a non-starter; no one would defend anything so implausible as that claim now. And so Nagel speaks of consciousness as "supervening upon" the natural world, in particular, the brain. My point is: it is precisely because one feature of Cartesianism is wholly and conclusively discredited that what persists is put forward in ways that is philosophically respectable. Yes, there is a sense in which Cartesianism, "after all these years" "persists"—but in forms that show the decisive triumph of *certain* arguments. Does Nagel's argument show that there has been "no progress" in philosophy of mind? I would say, not at all, just the opposite. Nagel's argument is possible only *because of* progress in philosophy of mind.

And of course, I think there is an analogous point to be made in moral philosophy. So consider utilitarianism. This may seem a poor choice on my part, but it is easy to forget how many undeniable insights come along with this view. So, it is just no longer optional to think of the aggregation of suffering, or benefit, as *irrelevant* to a moral assessment. It is no longer optional to see the race or gender of the bearer of suffering as having any moral relevance. It is no longer optional to see animals as having no moral weight at all. That's a lot of progress, when you think about it. And to return to the point made above regarding Cartesianism, it is worth re-reading Mill's initial essay and taking note of the many substantive refinements that have been made to the theory since its initial appearance. If utilitarianism "persists," surely this is in no small part due to the development of rule utilitarianism for example, a version of the theory Mill himself inchoately gestures towards from time to time, but hardly has before him in anything like a developed way. Analogously, if it is possible to be a Kantian today, this is because it is possible to hold this position, roughly understood, in ways that do not require defending the specific workings of the categorical imperative test, or Kant's metaphysical ideas regarding freedom. These doctrines *have* been refuted—in the form Kant himself put them forward at least. I think it is real progress to see that we can think of persons as free and equal for example without having to embrace anything like Kant's distinction between "the world as it appears" and "the world as it is apart from such appearance." That, I would say, is terrific progress indeed. And so *of course* Kantianism and utilitarianism "persist." They persist *because of* philosophical progress.

And finally, there is this insistence that social institutions are generally best understood "in terms of conflict" and "the morality and moral philosophy of the modern age are best

understood as milieus of conflict, sites of disagreements.” I am grateful to MacIntyre for making clear in this essay that he simply “follows John Anderson” here and does not purport to offer any stand-alone argument for this wildly ambitious generalization. At least I now know it is based on nothing more than a preference for what he thinks best fits his argument against modernity. For what does it mean to see all social institutions this way, always? We might, I guess, characterize hospitals “in terms of conflict”—there is the conflict with disease I suppose—but why not just see them as trying to heal those who come through their doors? We might, I suppose see religious institutions in terms of conflict—but here my imagination is beginning to fail me; I am not quite sure just how to do this. We might see schools in terms of conflict... the reader gets the idea. Why do this? What is the point, as opposed to simply characterizing institutions in terms of their distinctive teleology? I am baffled. Yet this claim is put forward as if its insightfulness, its plausibility, its *helpfulness* is as simple and as undeniable as Moore’s apprehension of the good. And why see this ascription, when it *is* plausible, as somehow distinctive to the modern age? Didn’t the Greeks meet in the Agora pretty much simply to disagree? Wasn’t the Medieval world obsessed with heresy? Wasn’t the Roman world characterized by ceaseless conflict, externally, with its neighboring empire rivals, and internally, with different political conceptions of what Rome should be, and in time, fatally, with Christianity? Like I say, we have not even reached MacIntyre’s account of Kant, or utilitarianism, or Rawls, or even, for that matter, Aristotle, and already I am exhausted with the many slights of hand, the unargued assumptions, the strange and to me quite counterintuitive descriptions.

All right; let me turn now to the central doctrines themselves, and then to some of the essays. I understand MacIntyre’s main argument to be something like this. Suppose we start with the conception of “good” that figures in emotivist arguments, where there is no idea of there being any correct criteria for use; we have here a pure performative one might say, since sincere use of the expression guarantees correctness. Like the Marxist account of liberal conceptions of property, for MacIntyre, this conception, while pernicious, and surely in some ways false, is also actually a true mirror of how things are in contemporary life, how things are in the actual world that philosophy purports to represent. I think MacIntyre must simply not be reading the *New York Times* very often, let alone *The Guardian*, for surely we are treated over and over to claims about, for example, sexual trafficking being bad, environmental degradation being bad, racial discrimination being bad, failing to provide economic opportunity for the poor being bad, and I think it is pretty clear that when activists or advocates say these things, they do not mean anything like what R.M. Hare or Alan Gibbard would have them mean. As an account of what contemporary moral life is actually *like*, this is no “caricature”; this is just remarkably inaccurate description. Unsurprisingly, while we read plenty about A.J. Ayer or John Paul Sartre, Peter Singer, Thomas Pogge and Ronald Dworkin fail even to be *mentioned* in MacIntyre’s account of



contemporary moral argument—and why is that? But I have said this before and I won't rehearse this again—we will stay on the philosophical side of the street from here on in.

So how does this woefully defective account of value get fixed? Practice, baby, practice.

We need to begin again and to do so by returning to the social context in which we learned the use of good and its cognates. What we first had to learn was how to make the distinction between what we desire and the choiceworthy...We characteristically and generally learn...to make [this distinction] as we emerge through and from the family into the life of a variety of practices: such practices as those of housework and farm work, of learning Latin and geometry, of building houses and making furniture, of playing soccer and playing string quartets. What we can learn only in and through such practices is what the standards of excellence are in each type of activity, and how our desires and feelings must be disciplined and transformed and our choices guided by the standards of excellence in each type of activity if we are to achieve such excellence and through it the goods internal to each type of practice...So long as our desires have not been disciplined and transformed in the relevant ways, our uses of good and of cognate expressions will tend to be what expressivist moral philosophers have taken them to be, and our choices will give expression [only] to our feelings and attitudes. (27)

It is in teleology that value gets fixed, that justification finally has a home. What makes for a good basketball player, or doctor, will be fixed by the standards tied to the distinctive end of such practices. OK, so far so good. But of course this account runs up against a predictable difficulty. While we can, knowing the nature of X, say what it is to be “a good X,” we cannot, yet, say whether it would be a good thing to be a good X. So we can say what it would be to be a good parent, or a good burglar, but we have to ask: Is it good to be a good parent? Or: Is it good to be a good burglar? MacIntyre reformulates this, plausibly, as:

Is a good parent, or a good burglar, a good human being? And so we are more or less forced to take up and provide an answer to *this* question, what is it to be a good human being, if we are to be able to say why some teleologies, such being a burglar, are not good after all. (24)

To his credit, MacIntyre does not duck the question, and dutifully tries to meet it. He gives what I would call a classic “modest naturalist/perfectionist” account—we need a certain minimum of material or natural goods, we need political security, we need the love and support of family, the possibility of activities that develop our deeper capacities—standard

commencement address type stuff. (25) I do not have that much interest in assessing this account critically; what I *am* interested in assessing critically is whether or not it is actually necessary after all. Is it in fact *true* that we “need to know” “what makes a good human being” (where this idea is understood teleologically—i.e., what *life* is best) in order to make sense of why a good burglar is not a good human being? No, actually, we do not. I think we can answer *that* question perfectly satisfactorily without any of this rich, albeit speculative, talk of what lives are best. We can say, as Kant would say, that persons have certain reasonable expectations of one another that stem from their being creatures of a certain kind, creatures capable of rational, intentional behavior, capable of assessing their intentions from a suitably impersonal point of view. Principles of action or rules of conduct that violate this conception of persons, or more accurately, violate the principles of conduct that come out of this conception, are therefore morally wrong. There; that wasn’t so hard. And even if MacIntyre could get his account of “what lives are best” (or “most choiceworthy,” to use the language I just love) off the ground, in virtue of which we could perhaps say why other *lives* are inferior or defective, we would still not have the right *sort* of tool for explaining why a certain *action* is wrong. Consider: someone might be leading the right life as MacIntyre understood it; he has that all figured out. We want to make sense of why a single act, never repeated, of theft is still wrong. I am assuming it does not in fact get detected and the life that the agent lives remains the best life. Surely, one small lapse does not ruin the *life*; we certainly don’t want to say *that*. (I think Aristotle says something more or less identical to this himself.) But the act of theft is wrong all the same because of what it does to the *other person*. It violates a legitimate, or well justified, expectation the other person has; it violates standards of how others are to be treated, what it is to respect another. MacIntyre of course will have no truck with such disorderly talk, talk that reeks of crises and contradiction. But therein lies the problem, or two problems. First, such talk does I think provide the best, by which I mean, the most straightforward, account of why certain actions that do not alter the life of the agent who performs them are nevertheless, for all that, *wrong*. And second, at the least, it shows that practice talk, and talk about “what it is to be a good human being,” to lead the best sort of life available to persons, is not the *only* way to make sense of why certain practices, let alone why certain single actions, are morally wrong. There is an alternative framework, never taken up.

Again, my claim is not that the Aristotelian framework “cannot” speak to this issue. My claim is that we dwell within a clunky, unpersuasive framework when we try. I think this is easiest to see if we change the example a bit, from “is it good to be a good burglar?” to “is it good to be a good rapist?” That there *is* such a thing as “a good rapist” is, sadly, undeniable. It is not for everybody, and I am sure among the armies in Sudan that use rape as a technique of terror, some soldiers stand out as good at this—they have the right virtues one might say (stamina, indifference, determination, I suppose)—and others, squeamish and

hesitant, do not. Do we really want to answer the question “why is it wrong (or bad) to be a good rapist?” by talking about the life of the person who *performs* this act? Is *that* where the justificatory work is to be done? I am sure the victim would find this most surprising. What is wrong with rape has very little, perhaps almost nothing, to do with “what it does” to the rapist, what sort of “best life” for the agent this act is inconsistent with or precludes. It has everything to do with what it does to the victim, what reasonable expectations are violated. This is so obvious, only one in the grip of philosophical theory would try to resist it. I once asked Jerry Fodor what he thought of Davidson’s view that mental content must be thought of as the product of interpretation, the ascriptions we think best fit the evidence, and he said “Why should what is going on in *your* head have *anything* to do with what is going on in *mine*?” An analogous remark seems right to me here. It is not what is going in the life of the *perpetrator* that explains the wrongness of rape. Why should that have anything to do with it at all? It is what this act does to another that does the justifying work here, and to make sense of *that*, to make sense of why the justification is well grounded, we need say very little about “what life is best,” or “most choiceworthy.”

Why *is* MacIntyre’s treatment of the Kantian and utilitarian argument so perfunctory? I am truly not sure. But that his failure to take up these arguments charitably will be seen as a serious, perhaps fatal, flaw in his overall legacy—of that I am certain. Here is the very little MacIntyre says here, in this volume taking up his whole life as a philosopher, as to why such arguments can be set aside. MacIntyre writes:

To have become such an Aristotelian [one who sees our “final end” as a life of ever deepening common practice - SR] is to have found good reasons for rejecting both utilitarianism and Kantianism. What renders any form of consequentialism unacceptable is the discovery of the place that relationships structured by unconditional commitments must have in any life directed towards the achievement of common goods...What makes Kantian ethics unacceptable is not only that our regard for those precepts [of natural law] depends upon their enabling us to achieve our common goods, but also that the Kantian conception of practical rationality is inadequate in just those respects in which it differs from Aristotelian phronesis or Thomistic prudentia. (29)

Sure, you *could* understand utilitarianism in a way that was vulnerable to this objection. This objection in fact more or less simply recapitulates Bernard Williams’ 1973 argument in *Utilitarianism For and Against*, made so dramatically with his story of the hapless Jim, the unfortunate Indians, and the cruel, cruel, Captain Pedro. But we *could*, also, just...understand... the... theory... differently. Indeed, we generally nowadays tend to understand *any* theory differently. That is, it is best to take any theory as operating in ways

that are congruent with whatever deep psychological habits of persons we can identify as enduring and non-controversial. So, we should not understand Marxism in a way that requires we see our kidneys as part of a collective pool of organs to be shared among all, or as holding that the novels or philosophy essays we write are not really “ours.” We should not understand our commitment to equality, if we are liberals, to require dismantling the family and subjecting all children to the same education everywhere. Why should not utilitarianism get the same reasonable interpretation? We might even come to feel that utilitarianism is in fact just best, or better, understood as a theory of social organization, not as a theory of personal relations or personal morality to begin with (this is in fact my view). But MacIntyre has no interest in any reformulations; this alleged difficulty makes “any form” of utilitarianism “unacceptable” (an interesting thing to say when you have not bothered to rehearse the other forms that are out there in proof of this claim). And while I am not sure exactly what MacIntyre has in mind when speaking of Kant’s “conception of practical rationality”—let us assume it is the categorical imperative test, in whatever form—surely there is a great deal more to Kantianism than *that*! Surely we can speak of Kant’s conception of persons as having worth, the idea that morality is about respecting that idea, and other matters. I would hardly think that finding Kant’s conception of practical rationality defective “renders *any* form of Kantianism unacceptable” (my italics, but MacIntyre’s words). What kind of moral philosophizing is that? Lazy, really.

Finally, after all this criticism, let me offer a bit of qualified praise. In the last section of his essay, MacIntyre takes up why it is, from the standpoint of practice, that academic moral philosophy appears “defective as a mode of inquiry.” I don’t think you have to feel, as MacIntyre does, that the best framework with which to make sense of justification is that of a “practice” in order to find much of what MacIntyre says here quite trenchant and suggestive. And reading it, I was struck by the thought that, while I know many who do indeed complain about the deeply artificial nature of much contemporary moral philosophy—the ridiculous disputes between realists and expressivists being perhaps the most egregious case—this feature of contemporary academic life is never publicly acknowledged, let alone taken up as something for which there might be an interesting explanation. And again, to his credit, MacIntyre puts forward several possible causes for why moral philosophy just lets us down these days. Again, I think MacIntyre’s real target here is contemporary meta-ethics. I don’t think discussion of why, or whether, we have obligations to the poor of the less developed countries could possibly be accused of the “defectiveness” MacIntyre here complains of. But when the target is suitably adjusted, there is surely something here worth exploring.

MacIntyre points to several reasons for why contemporary moral theory has the character it does. And again, one does not have to think MacIntyre’s own conception of justification

right, or his verdict on contemporary philosophy unqualifiedly true, in order to find this diagnosis worth considering. First, “the study of moral philosophy has become divorced from the study of morality or rather of moralities, and by doing so has distanced itself from practice.” (31) We don’t expect good work in philosophy of science from those who know nothing about some underlying science, “[b]ut there is not even a hint of a suggestion that courses in social and cultural anthropology and in certain areas of sociology and psychology should be a pre-requisite for graduate work in moral philosophy.” (31) However, the problem here is not to be thought of as one that could be rectified by simply requiring the prior right course work! Obviously, since values *really are* rooted in particular practices, contemporary philosophers should have first-hand experience of *these*. “Lacking such practical engagement and such reflection, there can be no adequate knowledge of the range and application of evaluative and prescriptive concepts. So we ought to require on the CVs of those who aspire to teaching or research appointments in moral philosophy accounts of their relevant experiences on farms and construction sites, in laboratories and studios, in soccer teams and string quartets, in political struggles and military engagements. And we do not.” (31–32) And finally, MacIntyre points to the politics of tenure, the way one must publish quickly, and to do that, one must write about exactly what has been written about, and in ways that mirror the ways in which it has been written about so far. “Habits of mind” are “transmitted,” “assumptions about which few books and articles must be read, which ones may be safely ignored, are taught by teachers and followed by students.” Academic philosophy is a “conformist discipline” and “habituation in writing what is well designed to secure the approval of those with established academic power is one principle means of producing and reinforcing that conformism.” (32–33)

I will not say much about the last point. I think it is undeniably true. If there is any trained philosopher who can read all the articles in two successive issues of *Ethics* (say) all the way through without crying out in pain, I would like to know her secret. But that this is so, and that it is too bad for us that it is so, must, I think, just be acknowledged and set aside, at least in this essay. I have no idea how to fix it. The first two claims interest me more, for they raise a wealth of interesting issues, insufficiently taken up MacIntyre himself.

First, to what extent do philosophers really “not know” the underlying sociology relevant to the moral philosophy they do? Again, let’s look at some examples. When Peter Singer writes about our habits, our tendencies, our attitudes in the face of requests to help the poor of the developed world, does he write “ignorant of” certain widespread psychological features of those who live in the developed West? I don’t think so; to the contrary, I would say that no small part of the reason for the “persistence” of his argument is the psychological acuity he shows about just this. When Thomas Pogge writes about the possibility of certain sorts of subsidy programs for those in need of expensive drug

treatments, say Africans with HIV, is he “ignorant of” the mechanisms that move contemporary governments and NGO bureaucracies? No, I don’t think so. And when Ronald Dworkin writes about certain arguments the Supreme Court on his view wrongly accepts regarding speech and political contribution, does he write “ignorant of” the law? Uh, no, I don’t think he does. No, in fact, I am pretty confident Dworkin is a lawyer, actually. This last example is a very important one, for me and for MacIntyre, and it is very much to MacIntyre’s discredit that it never appears in his account of “moral philosophy in the twentieth century.” For surely, if there is *any* underlying “social practice” that reveals a *lot* about “the nature of contemporary moral life in America and Britain,” a lot about the conflicts that beset us, that practice is the *law*. It is in courtrooms that questions of the possibility of gays joining the boy scouts, or the University of Michigan being allowed to consider race in its admissions, or the possibility of an Islamic woman keeping her head scarf on when getting her picture for a driver’s license, or the possibility of a government requiring everyone to buy health insurance or pay a penalty, or the possibility of the wealthy having unlimited freedom to contribute to political campaigns, are litigated and resolved. Sure, there are plenty of “contradictions” in the law. That is because it is a historical artifact, and it bears traces of a long complex tradition. Some of our property law goes back to the seventeenth century; some of our law is the recent creation of a fractious, influenced-besotted Congress. So what? If MacIntyre really believed in what he said, he would “look and see” as to just *which* “underlying practices” do have a substantive role in our present day moral life, and ask whether moral philosophers, are, at least some of the time, to some degree, conversant with *that*. The actual answer to this question would not be nearly so calamitous for contemporary moralizing as he makes out.

And while I am truly charmed by the idea of applicants for assistant professorships pointing, proudly, to their experience on “farms and construction sites, in laboratories and studios, in soccer teams and string quartets, in political struggles and military engagements,” it is by no means obvious that such experience, such immersion, would vindicate MacIntyre’s view of moral argument; not at all. I can easily imagine the applicant for the assistant professorship in the New Conception of Moral Philosophy saying, “you know, I was in Iraq and on a farm, I have been involved in school boards and worked with migrant labor in California, and I’ll tell you one thing: people are people wherever they are, and everybody deserves a fair shake, a minimum standard of living, and to live under the rule of law.” What a disappointment *that* would be, huh? No contradiction! No conflict! No oscillation! But I have to say, it seems a very plausible, very probable, recitation to me. What happened to moral philosophy in the twentieth century? I’ll tell you what happened. The idea of the person, bearing weight and generating obligations simply in virtue of being a person (Singer) or generating principles of cooperation when understood as free and equal to others in such a cooperative enterprise (Rawls, Scanlon), came to occupy a central, plausible role

in a variety of very powerful justification stories. Fixated on emotivism and Marxism, incredibly, but undeniably, MacIntyre has completely missed the *real* story of what happened in twentieth century moral theory. He is like an art historian who describes twentieth century art as coextensive with the ups and downs of Picasso, failing to notice, let alone speak of, DeKooning, Pollock, Rothko and others. It is a hard analogy to feel your way into, I realize—how could any so-called art historian do *that*? But what MacIntyre has actually done, or left out, is hard to feel your way into, too. Would anyone *commission* a “history” of twentieth century moral philosophy that left out Singer, Rawls, Dworkin, Scanlon? You would never imagine it possible. Let me be clear: the philosophical argument on offer is certainly worth taking up. To the extent MacIntyre offers an argument about the nature of justification, this argument is very much worth engaging with. But MacIntyre’s own defense of this view is fatally incomplete; he never considers alternatives in plausible ways, and, because alternative arguments *do* offer alternative, reasonable conceptions of justification, the claim that all evaluative issues can only be satisfactorily thought of within a practice based, teleological account is just never made out, never in fact plausibly defended. It could not be, for it is not true. The bad history causes or supports some very bad philosophy. Or, taking a page from MacIntyre’s own book: unsurprisingly, the two here go hand in hand.

### A look at some of the essays

There are eighteen essays here. I did not read them all. As I am not much of a historian, I generally did not look at those essays that were fundamentally historical, guided by the thought that I am not very well suited to assess such essays. My treatment of the other essays will of course be selective; A few essays stood out for me: “Marxism and the *Ethos* of the Twentieth Century,” by Raymond Geuss; “Evolutionary Ethics: A Metaphysical Evaluation” by Fran O’Rourke; “History, Fetishism, and Moral Change,” by Jonathan Ree. I will say a few words about each.

Those interested in an unapologetic Marxism, with some remarkable arguments (or perhaps more accurately, evasions), should not miss “Marxism and the *Ethos* of the Twentieth Century” by Raymond Geuss. Geuss takes the central challenge of the twentieth century, philosophically and culturally, to have been raised at the end of the nineteenth. It is Nietzsche who diagnoses our contemporary situation as one in which “all the highest values lose their value” and forms of authority lose their hold over individuals. (223) Thus the question for the twentieth century is: can there be a *universal morality*, supporting stable, empowering, ways of life that holds up against Nietzsche-like skepticism? (223—225) Parenthetically, it is a bit of a surprise to see Nietzsche pressed into supporting *this* aspiration; Nietzsche would seem to leave us with the view that

“universalism” is about the last thing that morality, when properly understood, needs to worry about. As it is with art, what should count in morals is just that some very good instances be constructed or realized going forward, that not everything be the sentimental inferior second class stuff we inevitably see when looking to our history since the slave revolt. But Nietzsche is made to request *this* because Geuss is a Marxist, and he thinks the other deep fact of the twentieth century is that Marxism did at least plausibly try to meet just this need, to answer just this question.

What about liberalism? Funny you should ask. Geuss is one of the few even to mention the doctrine, or the caricatured version of it a good Marxist must always have ready to hand. Liberalism, it turns out, is barely a political doctrine to begin with, “not really a full scale philosophy at all.” (225) Rather it is *either* merely “an attitude that is inherently adverbial” (the attitude that is behind “*whatever* one does in a certain spirit of openhandedness, flexibility and toleration with a minimal use of force” (225)) *or* it names a pernicious, self-contradictory specific politics. Liberalism is self-contradictory because, while liberals *claim* “not to be advocating one way of life over another,” they clearly are. Thus, for example, in the name of so-called “liberty,” the Conservative and Labor parties both actually enforce a ban on forced marriages! (226) And it is pernicious because “liberalism cannot be easily extracted from at least some kind of complicitous association with laissez faire capitalism, and so it inherits whatever deficiencies might be associated with that specific form of economic organization.” (225—226)

How is that for good, careful philosophizing? One has to admire the Swedes. Though liberalism cannot be “easily extracted” from laissez fair capitalism, somehow, they have done it. As has Finland and the rest of Scandinavia, actually. And there are even *theories*, liberal theories, that speak of distribution to the benefit of the least advantaged, the unskilled worker say. But these are dizzying feats, not to be tried at home. And why must a liberal be unable to make sense of any paternalistic law? It is funny Geuss chose that example (hoping to wrap himself in the flag of diversity no doubt), for the same point can be made regarding mandating that motorcyclists wear helmets, or that no one be allowed to consume heroin. Sure we respect freedom, but we can have good non-controversial grounds for prohibiting certain self-destructive choices. I would like to think it would be thus under Marxism, too.

Well, never mind. A good Marxist cannot be expected to spend too much time getting right the niceties of a second class doctrine. Why did Marxism, so noble in aspiration, fail? Or, since choice in politics is always “differential, not categorical” (230) why did the populations of Central and Eastern Europe so overwhelmingly choose to abandon self-proclaimed Marxist regimes in favor of capitalist ones when they were able to do so? *Not*



because such regimes “failed to end alienation”—the capitalist regimes hardly succeeded in this either (they never even sought to try, of course). (230) And “not because [such regimes] were oppressive and certainly not because they failed to be “democratic” in the sense in which that term is used in Western liberal societies.” (229) Well, *now* the reader’s curiosity is certainly peaked. “The lethal failure of twentieth century European Marxism was its inability to produce consumer goods at the level of quality and quantity that was attained by Western Europe.” (230)

And there you have it. It wasn’t the absence of governmental transparency, the hypocrisy, the oppression of national identity, the from-time-to-time purges, the absence of a free press or accountability, the absence of personal freedoms. It wasn’t the insistence that art be a certain way if it was to be seen, or that religious belief never be professed. It wasn’t the enforcement of false self-serving histories. It wasn’t the fact that professionals had to claim loyalty to an empty regime they almost certainly despised if they were to advance. It was not enough consumer durables. Not enough shoes, not enough pies. To be sure, the absence of material comfort was a real thorn in the sides of those in Central and Eastern European countries, especially since, prior to the Russian occupation, in many cases, they had comparable civic and economic institutions in place to those of Western Europe. Looking at the civic and industrial base of what is now the Czech Republic in the 1930s, for example, you would have certainly predicted that they would outperform Spain over the next forty years (probably Italy, too). Naturally, they minded! They knew very well it was only so called socialism that was holding them back. But the idea that political oppression had *nothing to do* with the collapse of these regimes is simply insane. No one living under these regimes, no one that witnessed or took part in their collapse would ever *say* that. For someone who professes a healthy respect for the social facts “behind” a philosophical theory, a few actual conversations with the residents of those countries would have been a salutary corrective.

And yet, at the end, Geuss turns to Aristotelian conceptions of desire and value and has some very nice, interesting criticisms to make. Aristotle, Geuss writes, seems gripped by a conception of how it is that desires, and so life, has value that on reflection seems forced, artificial. Why “should my desire be considered ‘empty and pointless’ just because it is part of a sequence of further desires that goes to infinity?” (235) My thirst, and my satisfaction of that thirst, is hardly empty or pointless just because it must be satisfied every time that it arises. And why should we see life in terms of “success” or “failure,” when so many of the deepest things we want cannot possibly be achieved (putting war criminals on trial for example—a very good case in point). After a certain amount of willful misreading of liberalism and recent history, Geuss gives us a very nice set of reflections on where we may plausibly find Aristotle’s view wanting.

In “Evolutionary Ethics: A Metaphysical Evaluation,” Fran O’Rourke offers a balanced if somewhat safe review of why purely biological or socio-biological accounts will not give us full accounts of persons and their moral life. I do not think you have to be an *Aristotelian* to resist crude reduction. At points, O’Rourke almost seems to sense this too; she does mention Dennett and Kitcher for example as allies in her argument. But she does appear to take it for granted that the only good non-reductive alternative is one that rehabilitates “final” and “formal” causation. She never mentions, let alone takes up, the non-reductive emergent view of say Jerry Fodor in “The Special Sciences.” And she has a tendency to substitute “Aristotle’s view of morality” for “any conception of morality that resists a reductionist account of moral reasons.”

For example, O’Rourke points out that genetic explanations for “a *propensity* to behave morally” hardly gives you a theory of *obligation*. It is a classic fact/value point really; just because I may have certain genes and these in turn give me certain tendencies, none of this yet gives me an argument, or justification story, for what I ought to do. (334—335) Whereas “Aristotle’s view on the contrary is immediately appealing because it offers personal reasons and incentives why we should be moral; it is centered upon individual happiness. Rather than ground morality on an impersonal process of species propagation...he recognizes that we are self-conscious individuals with a distinct nature and a rich potentiality to be freely realized.” (335) Well, sure, I guess. But you could put just about any moral philosopher in the second half of that sentence (perhaps Hobbes might be excepted) and get an equally compelling alternative to biological reduction. One might say, to have a moral theory at all is to have some account of how obligations arise, how a certain set of reasons for action can be impersonally justified and so forth. But this passage very much reflects something very deep in this collection. There are mistakes to be made, to be sure, and there are correct positions to be held, thank goodness, and the latter are almost always held exclusively by Aristotle.

In “History, Fetishism, and Moral Change,” Jonathan Ree begins with an interesting issue. How are we to think of moral change? We do not naturally see moral change as something like the changes we see in, say, fashion. We would like to think some eras are an improvement over others; some mark a terrible retreat. “There may be zigzags and reverses from time to time, but it seems probable that moral change, over the long term, involves something like a process of learning...or even something you call progress” (376). He notes, nicely, that we often to refer to certain barbarisms as “Victorian” indicating that what is in our past is often what cannot be justified. (377, 378)

I cannot myself see how we could speak of moral change and moral progress without being willing to speak of what is central about persons, and then the degree to which certain

practices—slavery, say, or marriage as it was understood in the eighteenth century, or indentured servitude, and so forth—fail to comport with this conception. It would be for this reason that the disappearance of such institutions would constitute moral progress. But, of course, in *this* collection, that is a line of thought that is not to be followed. Instead, the subject shifts a bit to what Ree calls “fetishism.” Fetishism is the philosophical strategy of presenting morality in a way that is isolated from history and culture, as some stand alone phenomenon, like, perhaps mathematics, or perhaps even better, the Cartesian mind. The familiar villains here are of course G.E. Moore and his emotivist and existentialist descendants. By contrast, Ree celebrates Sidgwick who in turn saw in Mill a genuine champion, suspicious of received ideas, and always attuned to the cultural understandings that explained the prejudices or limitations of the moral judgments of the day. (379)

Since any praise for any thinker remotely utilitarian is welcome, I should not carp. But Ree never mentions Rawls’ superb analysis of *Methods of Ethics*—a work Rawls called the best systematic treatment of ethics ever written in English—in his “Kantian Constructivism and Moral Theory.” Rawls notes that Sidgwick fundamentally conceived of the problem of ethics as *epistemological*—how do we know the good?—and the various “methods” that Sidgwick takes up and considers are taken up in service to *that* question. Sidgwick overlooks “the social role of morality”; the moral agent is thought of essentially as “mere knower.” The exercise of certain rational capacities in the service of discovering principles of cooperation is not before him. That is why Kant is seen by Sidgwick essentially as a defender of formal consistency, no more, and Kantian ethics is not considered in his methods. The link to Moore’s intuitionism is stronger than Ree would like to think.

Ree is right to see in Moore and Hare and Sartre a very strange conception of the good, shorn of all links to what in fact it is connected to: social life, the law, naturalistic teleologies. But to give Moore and Hare their due, they saw themselves as offering an analysis of a philosophical *concept*. They were not interested in particular moral judgments and their justification. When Ree quotes Moore as saying: “we may justly pride ourselves that we have a better chance of answering our question rightly than Bentham or Mill or Sidgwick,” “the question” Moore is referring to here, of course, is that of the *meaning* of “good.” He does not mean, contrary to what Ree suggests, that Moore thought himself better than Mill or Sidgwick at detecting which *things* were good. (379)

Ree ends the essay on a strange note, rehearsing, with more charity than I would think justified, Sartre’s pompous and self-serving attack on Camus when Camus, in *The Rebel*, claimed a connection between the “prophetic dream of Marx” and the Soviet “terrorist state.” (387) And Ree speculates, without much elaboration, that perhaps “leftism” which provided the context for this quarrel, “has [also] been a casualty of the fetishism of morality

in the twentieth century.” In a way, I think this may be right, though I am not sure Ree would like my gloss on his suggestion. In so far as the left has made a fetish of the means of production and getting that right (allegedly), it has been quite uninterested all the other things that people, if not philosophers, *are* in fact interested in: liberty, checks on governmental power, the absence of coercion in opinion formation, transparency in government, accountability. As Moore forgot all the things moral life is in fact connected to in pursing his analysis, so did the left, apparently. In this collection of essays, though, only one of these two is likely to be called out on this glaring omission.